

Idaho farmer's use of laser-sharp GPS technology key to maze designs

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ERIE, Colo. (AP) - Five years ago, Jim Anderson was like countless other family farmers, struggling to make a living in an industry that has grown bitterly unprofitable. Then he discovered "agritainment." Now, the Erie farm that Anderson's father and uncle bought in 1958 has been transformed into a kind of old-fashioned amusement park, with hayrides, pumpkin patches, a petting zoo and, the crowning jewel, an elaborate cornfield maze.

While the idea behind "agritainment" is to take visitors back in time, the making of it was more like back to the future - Anderson's elaborate maze was built using global positioning system technology.

The bridge between past and present is Shawn Stolworthy, a one-time Idaho potato and grain farmer who also turned to corn mazes a few years back when making a living growing food got too tough.

Instead of painstakingly making a grid and cutting the maze on his Firth farm himself, as was the custom then, Stolworthy, his brother and a friend jury-rigged a GPS system that could tell him exactly how to navigate the dizzying cornstalks.

Soon, Stolworthy had abandoned his own corn maze and was traveling the country with his homemade system, designing and cutting elaborate corn mazes for farmers turned entertainers all across the United States.

"It was very frustrating the first couple times; there were lots of problems," Stolworthy said, noting that when you make your own computer system "there's no manuals."

But Stolworthy has gradually fine-tuned his system - and his array of fancy maze designs - into a streamlined process. Now he can show up at a farm in the morning and leave that night with a maze completed. A similar project could take as long as two weeks by hand. The time savings were what attracted Lyle Murray to Great Adventure. Last year, Murray decided to turn one of the fields on his 85-year-old family farm in Brighton into a maze to make some extra money. But because he still grows corn, wheat and alfalfa, Murray did not have time to spend precious days building a maze.

"We didn't try it ourselves, because today, you've gotta have the technology, you've gotta have the computer program," he said.

You wouldn't guess at the high-tech way the mazes are made when you pull up to Anderson's farm, where corn stalks glisten in the sun against a dramatic mountain backdrop. Indeed, both Murray and Anderson have found a cottage business in the nostalgia of visiting a farm.

Peggy Shupe, Anderson's business partner and cousin - and a former technology entrepreneur - believes they are only beginning to tap the potential to market the farm experience.

Shupe expects 36,000 people to visit the corn maze this year, up from 30,000 last year. She also hopes to expand the farm's business of renting space for private parties,

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believing the farm can draw weddings and class reunions year-round, rather than just during the summer months.

"A lot of people are two or three generations from the farm now," Anderson said, and no longer can visit Grandma's farm like they once could.

Murray considers himself an educator as much as an entertainer. During visits to his farm, he said he'll often quiz his guests about what crops are growing and what pieces of farm machinery are used for which jobs. Last year, he even started handing out brochures.

"It's sad to me that people are not in reality," he said. "People don't understand where their food is coming from. They have no concept of what it takes to produce a bushel of corn."

On the Net:

Anderson Farms: <http://www.afe-llc.com>

Murray Maze 2002: <http://www.murraymaze.com>

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